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YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

VOLUME XXXVI - NUMBER 1

JANUARY 1957



EL CAPITAN, YOSEMITE VALLEY

—Ansel Adams

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Sugar Pine Forest, Yosemite National Park

(Photo by Van Name, courtesy of Emergency Conservation Committee)

Yosemite Nature Notes

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VOL. XXXVI

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NO. 1

A SIERRA TRAIL

By Gerald O. Mayland

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Across the stream a deer trail beckons one to explore. Dense mature red firs, straight as a shaft of light, grow to great heights. Standing with dignity, these trees with yellow, weathered bark, seem ageless. Signs of a trail are disappearing as the trees heal the wound made by the trail axe. Further on a whole group of red fir rest on the ground. The huge crater produced by the root system as the tree topples is quite large and deep. The roots are still clinging to the rocks and soil that once was the foundation of the tree. The thick red bark lay in a loose row along the sides of the fallen giants and here many young trees, uniformly branched, begin their life.

Snow is refusing to melt in little patches and only a trickle of water wanders on to join the brook. The wind stirs the needles on the downwept branches of fir and the sound of the brook invades the solitude that has closed in the forest. The trail disappears and the noisy brook is the guide. Through a clearing rocks and a knoll are observed. A

patchwork of flowers, tiny blossoms that barely clear the ground, pinks, blues, yellows, and whites, some plain, others with stripes on their petals, as if painted by an artist, covers this knoll.

Many birds make up the forest choir. Their song is distant and sometimes overhead. The western tanager, scarlet, yellow and black, is seen as is the popular robin. Many sparrows of different species are present. The red-breasted nuthatch frequents the firs in search of food.

A lonely twisted gnarled pine grows atop a barren rock. Barely 2 feet in height, it seems to challenge the weather and the wind to unseat it. The trunk of the tree disappears into a crevice in the rock. On higher ground, a shearing off of rock is more evident and solid wavy sheets roll upward to form the massive knoll. At the base of the rock a spring trickles forth to add its water to the brook. Near the spring many old trees have fallen. All that remains of some is a shattered stump and broken branches; half naked of bark, they lie solitary and still.

The sound of the brook is feeble now and lazy little pools of water eddy near the rocks. Trout can be seen in their clear depths. Motionless one moment, they burst forth the next in a display of speed and color. At times the fish stay fixed in one position while the stream carries their food to them. A gust of wind in mid-afternoon ripples the water in the still places. The dead branch of a tree comes crashing down, disturbing the scene. A half-submerged log serves as a bridge to cross the stream.

Scarcely 50 feet from the stream grows a startling red flower. About 9 inches high and colorfully stout, it has bell-shaped flowers clasped about its stem. A halo of scales forms its crown—a snow plant so striking and so beautiful, it grows apart from any of its own kind. It is unusual to see a flower with stem and blossom all one color.

The young trees near the stream have dried grass and twigs wedged in their tiny branches. The spring thaw has swept the stream bank of its litter and only the little trees stand in its path.

The blue of the sky above, the green of the grass along the stream, the brown of the matted forest floor, and the varied colors of the rocks in the water all blend together to make a scene restful to the eye and calming to the soul.

Farther up the mountain is a stream bed long since dry, with only sand, gravel and polished rocks to indicate its path. The trail becomes difficult in the dense manzanita and brush. Finally it emerges on a high plateau, so still and tranquil amidst a patch of wildflowers. Again the startling snow plant makes its appearance as if to say it could only grow in unusual terrain. Beautiful young red firs grow beneath a tall remarkable red fir. The base of the

tree is ringed by a mass of fallen bark and forest duff. This pedestal of earthy brown is about a foot high. The trail wanders on top as far as the ridge permits and descends as leisurely.

Under the shade of a red fir, three little grouse chicks are seen. A plump mother grouse, brown and buff, is scurrying and whirring to attract attention to herself. The chicks, amid all this excitement, take to cover. Farther on another mother grouse is seen protecting her young; decoying and fluttering, she leads her brood to safety in the deep grass near the ferns.

The deep grass grows near the bank of a little brook. So tiny is this brook that the grass is parted to make sure of its course. A wet marshy place lies beyond and swamp onions are found here. They are tiny spikes, miniatures of the domestic variety. The hooves of many deer have worn a deep flat groove in the soft earth of the trail. The game trail ascends over scree rocks. In many places slides have notched their impressions and spilled rock and gravel on the path. Huge boulders of granite lie in the bed of sand and gravel. Rounded corners, smooth and textured tops, indicate that the original glacial action has been softened by the wind and water. An immense boulder, the shape of a hull of a capsized ship, seems to divide the trees from the flowers. A graveyard of trees lies beyond. Some have lost their crowns while others appear to have been blasted in the middle, lying in criss cross rows like a vast burial plot. Upon the trunk of a standing dead tree a beautiful, cream colored fungus is growing, nearly encircling one third of the tree at a height of 2 feet. A tiny chipmunk scampers across a log; he seems alone and small in his kingdom of trees. Over a knoll o

ck and manzanita the trail struggles down the slope. An old forest burn provides a new stand of red fir. Each is growing gracefully apart from the other. Not confined by close company they clothe themselves from their base to their top with green, evenly-spaced branches.

Two young fawns dart out from beneath an overhanging shelf of rock. One bounds up into the brush and the other races away down the slope of polished rock. Both are as startled as the intruder. The fawns are lost from view as the trail passes between two large boulders and descends a steep brush-covered bank. Lizards move hastily out of the way and a startled doe bounds out from cover and leaps in graceful arcs out of sight. It is a genuine struggle to keep track of the path and watch nature's children. Down the slope on a bit of flat land, moles are digging their mines. Long rows of hilled soil indicate the work of these miners. Across the meadow, walled in by trees, the trail continues. The sun

shines brightly from the blue sky. False Solomon seal grows in a wet, boggy place near trees. Large green leaves, widely spaced on a husky stem, makes this a welcome sight. Butterflies and bees seek out the flowers and the birds sing in the nearby woods. The trail enters a corridor of trees, each with yellow-green lichen on its bark and branches. Passing through the trees the trail winds along the tree-lined bank of a mountain stream. Peaceful now it glides along in a deep channel. It must have been a torrent in early spring. Entire trees, roots still intact in a clump of earth, have slid down the bank and all appear to be alive. Blue daisies border the trail in sunny spots, while ferns choose to grow in the shade. A tiny leopard lily, orange and yellow petals with a spotted center, grows in a place where the stream overflowed its bank. The trail approaches the opposite bank from which it began in the morning and it ends, as it began, by the stream.



NOTES FROM MY TUOLUMNE JOURNAL

By Will Neely, Ranger-Naturalist

Conquer a peak? The "conquest" of Everest, they call it . . . as though one can conquer a peak by scrambling around on its top, as though that fly which alights on my table has conquered it! I remember the Chinese fable of the monkey who traveled for months across great plains until he came to the place where he said the end of the earth dropped off into space and where five pillars supported the sky, when actually he had been running around the palm of Buddha's hand and found his five fingers. These little people who run upon mountains and call themselves mountaineers . . . have they, or have their gadgets, their ropes, pitons, expansion bolts and ice axes earned the credit?

I am alone on the mountain today, one of Tuolumne's most regal and majestic mountains, and I find myself wandering along the flanks and swelling base, and then am lead upward over the rocks, for I have heard of a rare succulent, a Claytonia growing in one of the seepy, rocky streams halfway up. But I gradually forget about Claytonia, for dark clouds have come up or materialized overhead and the great old mountain has become bigger and more somber, and its regal face now frowns in warning. I seem to be entering the great vaulted hall of Wotan. Above in the clouds old Thor is rumbling in his beard.

I climb on, possessed by a glorious, free wildness, going from rock to rock, over slates and rusty quart-

zites, over compressed, hard, ringing layers of old sea-bottom sands, whose extinct shores are now lapped by clouds, whose ancient tidal pools are now cirques where glaciers eddy and flow. The summit is but the smallest part of a mountain. I am there soon enough, but must go on again and down a ridge where the wind might be blowing with yet more wildness, and I find it there, singing a mighty tune. It breathes of Pacific air, whose ocean vapors are now icy crystals and sleety mists. How fine it is to be breathed upon by this sharp wind. I feel I am being etched.

I work across a narrow ridge and look down the precipice to the glacier and its moraines below, while in the lee side a flock of rosy finches gaily flies across the abyss, their songs ringing echoes from the walls, then like descending snowflakes, they alight on the glacier ice to feed.

When at last I start down to the meadows toward camp I wonder why it is necessary. Am I going back? Must we always go back to some place, to a camp or tent or house? Perhaps that is why the summit has such exaggerated importance because it represents the turning back place where one starts home. But why not let the top be the beginning? All places can be starting places, and where one is, is where one is going. A mountain climber nowadays is tied by a long elastic cord to his home base which sooner or later pulls him in again. But when one is truly free, one need



The View South From The Summit of Mt. Dana, Mt. Lyell and the Lyell Glacier to the Right of Center.

—Anderson

never leave the mountain, but can browse upon it, like a mountain sheep, up and sideways, always back, always home, always there . . . the mountain being food and home.

Below the alpine meadows begin, and I leave the rocks and follow the streams into the tufty alpine grasses. Water gurgles in little meanders in the sod, and I lie down in the soft grass to watch the drifting clouds as the storm moves off to the east. Turning over and examining the meadow at a frog's-eye view, I discover a patch of the rare snow willow (*Salix nivalis*), half an inch high. Few ever see it in Yosemite or there are just a few spots where it grows, and its tiny leaves poke up through the gravels and grasses and arctic sedges like little mouse-ears.

Among them is an even rarer plant, a little white flower which has migrated thousands of years ago from the arctic regions, perhaps from the Bering Straights. You will not find its name in any of the Yosemite flower lists, nor even in Jepson's *Flowering Plants of California*. It has crept in, unnoticed by most, found company with the snow willows and settled down to someday surprise collecting botanists. I will keep its incognito existence a secret.

The sun is long since down and I walk home through the forests in the dark, not at all wearied. But I am still home-bound and food-bound and have not yet learned to survive on a diet of rocks and wind as the lichens. Did I conquer Mt. Dana? Did it feel the little fly crawling on its top?

THE 1879 NATIONAL SUNDAY SCHOOL ASSEMBLY CONVENTION IN YOSEMITE VALLEY

By Richard L. Lehman, Ranger-Naturalist

For two years, the time since the last convention, church and Sunday school leaders from across the State and Nation had looked forward to the coming Sunday School Convention which was to take place in the famed Yosemite Valley. As the month of June 1879 neared, delegates to the convention converged towards Yosemite. From the East a special train chuffed westward across the continent. From Alaska and Japan missionaries and delegates were arriving in San Francisco. Travel from up and down the State quickened, and by the first days of June carriage and horse traffic choked the four wagon routes leading to Yosemite Valley. Delegates from 23 states and from nearly all of California's counties were arriving, mostly in their own conveyances.

Yosemite Valley bulged with people as it never had before, every sleeping place in hotel and home filled half-a-dozen to the room, and even the stable lofts and sheds found occupants. Tents dotted the valley floor and evening campfires, surrounded by groups of happy campers, brilliantly illuminated the Yosemite. The evening air rang with the mirth and song of the excursioning Sunday school leaders.

As the day for the opening of the convention neared, church leaders anxiously watched for the progress of the men who were erecting the chapel in which many of the assembly meetings were scheduled to be held. Work on the wooden structure had been under way since early in May near the base of the present

Four Mile Trail. All during the preceding year the Sunday School Assembly had conducted a national drive to secure funds to build the first church in Yosemite, and the occasion for the convention was the dedication of the non-denominational chapel.

At last, on the evening of the seventh of June, Guardian Galen Clark opened the convention.* The new chapel, complete except for ceiling and paint, was filled to overflowing and many listened through the open doors and windows. After Rev. R. M. Gibson of San Francisco formally welcomed the delegates, they were treated to Chatauqua vesper services and an address by Rev. Dr. J. H. Vincent of Boston, in charge of the convention.

The next morning, the eighth of June, Sunday school was held for the first time in the Yosemite Chapel. With eight noted teachers headed by Dr. Vincent, and 116 pupils from 16 states, the first lesson, "The Restoration of the Israelites," was presented. The chapel was formerly dedicated at the morning service with Rev. Thomas Guard of Oakland preaching.

The afternoon of the dedication Rev. Dr. Sheldon Jackson of Denver, who was head of Indian missions in Alaska Territory, talked on "The Aztecs". For the whole week that followed some kind of program was held in the chapel each day and evening. In addition to the religious services and programs led by a battery of eminent ministers and lecturers, including Rev. Dr. Joseph Cook and Bishop Matthew Simpson



Yosemite Chapel

—Ansel Adams

of Boston, the Rev. Peltz of New York, and Rev. Dr. Eile, the celebrated Hutchinson singers from Lynn, Mass., and a minstrel group from San Francisco performed. John Muir was present as he had been paid \$100 in advance to give two addresses on glaciation during the convention.

On the evening of June 12, Rev. Joseph Cook, an orator said to be the equal of Daniel Webster, spoke from the pulpit with great force, upholding the rending-of-the-earth's crust concept of the formation of Yosemite Valley. Muir spoke following Rev. Cook and, in mild tones, explained the evidence that the glaciers had left in Yosemite Valley which he had found in his explorations. The crowded audience was completely won over by Muir's manner and quiet logic. The next morning 200 of the delegates, including

Rev. Cook, followed the great naturalist to Glacier Point on what was perhaps the first interpretive excursion in the Yosemite.

During the course of the convention, the delegates had opportunity to turn sightseers and a good many explored the waterfalls, cliffs and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias. However, the disposition of at least one church leader was adversely affected by the rugged roads of the region. "At the 'trees' he evinced the most vituperate qualities of temper and mind in his abuse of the gentleman who acted a guide; and who ought to have given the clerical offender a sound thrashing . . . and he was not the only one who murmured at every dollar that they had to expend . . . denouncing everyone connected with any business in Yosemite as liars, swindlers, and cheats."

On June 15 the convention adjourned to meet later in the month at Monterey, and after a few days the Mariposa Gazette reported "all the Sunday school marms and chapel orators have left the Valley."

And although the hubub week of the convention was soon forgotten, the Yosemite Chapel is still to be seen and is still in use—a memorial to the Sunday School Assembly and its convention here 76 years ago.

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2. **Mariposa Gazette**, May 31, 1879. June 14, 1879. June 21, 1879.
3. **Son of the Wilderness**, p. 202, Linnie Marsh Wolfe. Alfred Knopf. 1951.
4. "Brief History of the Village Chapel." Rev. Alfred Glass. **Yosemite Nature Notes** 24 114-8. "Galen Clark gives his reaction to the construction of the chapel in the **California Farmer**. "It seems to be almost a sacrilege to build a church within the grandest of all God's temples. But it will clearly show the contrast between the frail and puny works of man, as combined with the mighty grandeur and magnificence of the works of God, and I hope it will do good."1

THE CURIOUS COYOTE

By Ronald Bainbridge, Ranger-Naturalist

I am sure that many have experienced the plaintive call of the mountain coyote. Perhaps its doleful nocturnal cry makes a back country visitor feel the need of putting another log or so on the campfire. Because of its color - a grizzled, greyish, tawny hue many mistakenly take the coyote for a gray wolf, of which there are probably none left in California. However, his appearance more resembles a German shepherd dog.

A never ending persecution of this fine rodent-dispenser has made him shy and coy whenever man is involved. In spite of bounties, traps, poisons and hunters, the coyote seems to be holding his own wherever wilderness still exists for he can rapidly adapt himself to ever-changing conditions. The yapping coyote who stays his distance at night, might, however, take a change and furtively creep into your camp at dawn to look around. Why will they dare to invade the domain of their worst enemy?

One fine August morning at a

time when most people were just thinking of rising or, at the most, just getting their breakfast fire started, was driving in the lower part of Yosemite Valley. Through the trees on one side of the road I spied a mature coyote nonchalantly trotting along in a path that was parallel to the progress of the car. I stopped, only to see the coyote stop in his tracks, eyeing us all the time. I started up again and so did he. As I changed the speed of the car, his pace quickened. When I slowed, his trot also slackened. For well over a mile the co-companionship of coyote and car continued. Finally, apparently losing interest in the game, *Canis latrans* changed course and trotted into the woods.

I doubt that any love or trust exists on the part of the coyote as far as man is concerned. Apparently this incident indicates but one thing, like his foe *Homo sapiens*, the coyote is a curious being. I wonder if his long nose ever proves to be his downfall? Curiosity could kill the coyote!

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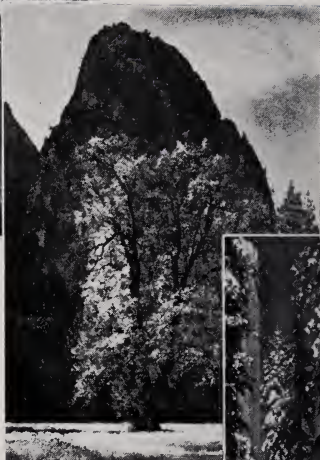
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